EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH DIALOGUE: HOW FORUMS FOSTER UNDERSTANDING AND INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of forums on enhancing community awareness and inclusivity of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). The primary objectives are to assess changes in awareness, compassion, and support for PWDs among community members after attending a forum session, and to identify ongoing challenges in fostering inclusivity. Utilising a quantitative approach, a survey was administered to 31 respondents immediately following the forum session. The research explores how such platforms contribute to increased awareness and advocacy efforts for PWDs within the community. The forum, designed to facilitate open dialogue and personal storytelling, was part of a broader program aimed at bridging the knowledge gap surrounding disability-related issues. The results indicated a significant increase in awareness and empathy towards PWDs, with the mean score for understanding PWD challenges rising from 2.0 (pre-forum) to 4.5 (post-forum), and commitment to advocating for PWD rights increased from 2.5 to 4.7. Additionally, participants showed an enhanced understanding of the capabilities of PWDs (mean score increasing from 2.2 to 4.6), and a greater comfort in interacting with PWDs (rising from 2.8 to 4.2). Findings suggest that participants developed a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by PWDs and showed a greater commitment to advocating for inclusivity. However, challenges such as societal stigma and limited engagement persist. This study underscores the importance of continuous efforts to foster inclusive communities through forums and similar educational initiatives.

Keywords: PWDs, Inclusivity, Awareness, Empathy, Communities.

INTRODUCTION

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) often face significant barriers in education, employment, and social inclusion (Naz, 2020; Chumo et al., 2023; Cruz et al., 2024 & Odeh & Lach, 2024). Despite ongoing efforts to promote awareness and inclusivity, misconceptions and societal stigma about PWDs persist, limiting their access to equal opportunities. To address these challenges, forums and public engagement initiatives are increasingly being utilised as platforms for raising awareness, changing perceptions, and fostering empathy towards PWDs (Chawa at al., 2021 & Tiner, 2020).

Communities can gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by PWDs through forums that facilitate open discussions, self-advocacy efforts and diverse perspectives. These platforms aim to bridge knowledge gaps, challenge misconceptions and promote inclusive practices, which subsequently empower communities to be more understanding and supportive of PWDs.

In Malaysia, the growing number of registered persons with disabilities underscores the urgency of this issue. PWDs are defined as individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that impede their full participation in society, as defined in *Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya* (Person with Disabilities Action Plan,

PTOKU) 2016-2022. The *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* (Department of Social Welfare, JKM) reported a total of 691,630 registered PWDs aged 19 to 45 years, representing a diverse array of disabilities, as of January 31, 2024.

These disabilities are categorized into seven main types as shown in Table 1.1

Table 1.1: Categories of Person with Disability (Person with disabilities Act, 2008)

Category	Description
Hearing Disability	Individuals who cannot hear clearly without the use of hearing aids or who remain unable to hear even with hearing aids. The four levels of hearing disability are categorized as follows: Mild - (20 - < 30 dB) (for adults) Moderate - (30 - < 60 dB) Severe - (60 - < 90 dB) Profound - greater than 90 dB
Visual Disability	Individuals with visual impairments or low vision in one or both eyes, despite the use of visual aids such as spectacles and contact lenses. Visual disabilities can be classified into two categories as follows: Blindness Improved eyesight, yet vision remains below 3/60 despite the use of visual aids, or the visual field is restricted to less than 10 degrees from fixation. Low vision/partially sighted Vision is classified as poorer than 6/18 but equal to or better than 3/60 with the use of visual aids, or the visual field is restricted to less than 20 degrees from fixation.
Physical Disability	A person experiencing dysfunction in bodily operations due to either a physical defect or injury. Disabilities included in this category comprise stunted or crippled hands or legs, maimed thumbs, paralysis, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, and cerebral palsy. Impairments that do not impact functions, such as having one finger or six fingers or more, and the presence of imperfect earpieces, are not classified as physical disabilities.
Learning Disorder	Individuals whose intelligence is unbalanced with their biological age. Individuals with Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), specific learning disabilities (such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia), and global developmental delay are classified within this category.
Speech Disorder	A person with hearing ability but experiencing speech difficulties.
Mental Disorder	An individual diagnosed with a severe or chronic mental disorder and who has received treatment or a diagnosis from a psychiatrist for a minimum of two years. Due to the illness, they remain unable to function, either partially or fully, in relation to themselves or the

	community, despite having undergone psychiatric treatment. Schizophrenia, mood disorders, and chronic organic mental disorders are classified within the categories of mental illnesses.
Various Disorder	A person with multiple disabilities that do not fit into any of the five established categories. An individual with both vision and hearing disabilities will be classified under the category of multiple disabilities.

The current Madani government has implemented significant measures to ensure the PWD community is not marginalised and receives the necessary support. Through collaboration with the *Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Orang Kurang Upaya* (National Council for Persons with Disabilities) and various other agencies, the government has emphasised a multi-sectoral approach to address these issues, as outlined in the Section 3(1) of Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. However, societal stigmas and misconceptions continue to create barriers for PWDs, underscoring the need for ongoing community education and engagement (Bonaccio et al., 2019 & Hossen & Reed, 2023).

This study investigates the impact of a forum designed to enhance community members' understanding of PWDs and their willingness to advocate for greater inclusivity. The forum, featuring personal testimonies and expert discussions, was part of a broader program aimed at challenging misconceptions and highlighting the rights and capabilities of PWDs. To measure the effectiveness of the forum, a survey was administered to 31 participants immediately following the session. The survey assessed changes in awareness, empathy, and attitudes toward PWDs. By examining these outcomes, the study contributes to a growing body of research on community engagement and inclusivity, providing valuable insights into the role of forums in promoting social change.

The objectives of this research are twofold: (1) *to measure the extent to which the forum influenced participants' awareness and perceptions of PWDs*, and (2) *to identify persistent challenges, such as societal stigma, that may continue to hinder full inclusivity*. Understanding these dynamics can inform future initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive communities through education and engagement efforts. Through the effort of creating a platform and controlling feedback, a conducive environment is created for PWDs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper draws upon several key areas to observe how forums contribute to increasing awareness and inclusivity for PWDs. The literature on disability studies and social inclusion efforts were explored. Additionally in the context of this study, the literature on the use of forums as one of the tools in exploring and understanding PWDs.

Understanding Persons with Disabilities

PWDs are a diverse group facing an array of long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory disabilities that prevent them from fully and effectively participating in society (*Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya*, 2016-2022). Understanding the complex nature of disability is critical for developing inclusive environments that value the rights and dignity of individuals. This is further emphasized by Hillan (2023) and Mohaved (2023) who highlighted the necessity of inclusive environment to be created for PWDs to ease their daily routines. Difficulties manifest in various forms, including mobility limitations, vision and hearing impairments, cognitive difficulties, and mental health issues (Prajapati & Sharmila, 2023). Each of these groups faces distinct obstacles, requiring appropriate modifications to allow PWDs to properly navigate daily life (Ariffin & Abdullah, 2020).

Recognising the social model of disability is an important part of understanding the experiences of PWDs. This perspective emphasises that impairments are shaped by societal attitudes, institutions and barriers, rather than solely an individual's condition (Babik & Gardner, 2021 & Wang et al., 2021). This shift in viewpoint moves away from perceiving disability as a personal tragedy to seeing it as a societal issue requiring a collective response. For instance, many people

with mobility disabilities struggle to access public areas because of architectural impediments such as staircases without ramps or inadequate signage (Bashiti & Rahim, 2016 & Khir & Zakaria, 2023). By addressing these systemic difficulties, communities may build conditions that enable PWDs to fully participate in social, economic, and educational activities.

The Role of Forums in Community Awareness

Dialogue and forums are key tools in driving social change, particularly in promoting understanding and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs). According to Ali et al. (2015), forums have been identified as effective platforms for peer support. Kilinc and Atinpulluk (2021) mentioned that forums enable learners to create information, collaborate and interact simultaneously. A forum usually contains multiple discussion topic within one overall conversation. It encourages participation, allowing diverse perspectives to emerge and fostering empathy. This contributes to broader discussions on social inclusion and awareness within the context of forums and community engagement (Rolle et al., 2020). Active participation matches up with enhanced learning or sharing outcomes as engagement boosts confidence and it encourages discussion which will lead to better academic performance (Wong et al., 2015).

Programs, such as forums, which are designed to raise disability awareness should be organised frequently. The design and facilitation of these forums are critical, creating a safe and collaborative environment encourages participants to participate freely, which in turn strengthens their learning communities (Aderibigbe, 2020). Azizi et al. (2018) and Madhesh (2022) through studies among university students found that the respondents exhibited a moderate level of disability awareness. The authors also highlighted that topics on disability should be included in the curricular academic course and academic discussions on disability-related issues need to be encouraged among faculty members. Ultimately, dialogue-based forums act as catalysts for social transformation, creating more informed and inclusive communities. They pave the way for greater acceptance and understanding of PWDs, promoting their full participation in society.

The Role of Peer Support and Community Empowerment through Forums

Apart from raising awareness in the community, it is undeniable that peer support and community empowerment could harness significant and positive results in enriching the inclusion of PWDs in society (Ali, 2023; Jasiyah, 2024). These studies provide compelling evidence on how structured peer interactions can enhance communication and relationship-building opportunities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive environment. Trausch (2021) further elaborated the context of peer support, and the sense of empowerment provided to PWDs as one of the best aspects in fostering inclusive environments for them. The use of forum as the tool to cultivate a controlled social interaction is seen as effective in nurturing the support intended.

Nalugya et al. (2023) addressed the challenges faced by individuals involved in providing peer support and initiating empowerment for them for an extended period. They discussed that appropriate interventions are needed to maintain lasting support and empowerment. Forums help to create this environment by providing a structured and controlled interaction with clear goals in its interactions. Hence, the intended exposure on increasing awareness, support and compassion towards PWDs could be achieved. This would promote valuable insights and enhanced social engagement in society as suggested by Saxena et al. (2019) and Koritsas (2022).

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Despite many initiatives, such as Malaysia's *Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya* 2016-2022 and advocacy programs aimed at increasing inclusion, PWDs continue to encounter substantial challenges, such as low community knowledge and ongoing social stigma. While awareness campaigns and policies underscore the importance of inclusivity, their effectiveness can be limited if societal biases are deeply rooted and resistant to change. Forums have emerged as significant platforms for raising awareness and correcting misunderstandings, but there is limited evidence of their long-term effectiveness in changing opinions and instilling empathy for people with disabilities. To understand if forums can bridge the gap between awareness and actual inclusive attitudes, it is essential to examine not only the immediate impact of these dialogues but also their potential to create sustained behavioral change. This research aims to examine the influence of a particular forum on community members' understanding and perceptions of PWDs, as well as to identify

persisting difficulties, such as social stigma, that continue to block their full inclusion. These challenges are often reinforced by societal structures and cultural norms that may inadvertently exclude PWDs, underscoring the need for interventions that address both individual attitudes and systemic barriers. This study's specific objectives address two main research questions. First, *how do forums impact PWD awareness and views?* Second, *what impediments, despite awareness initiatives, continue to prevent the participation of PWDs in society?*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach to assess the impact of forums on community members' awareness and perceptions of PWDs. A post-forum survey was conducted to gather numerical data from participants to measure changes in attitudes, understanding, and commitment to supporting PWDs. The survey included closed-ended questions and Likert scales to quantify responses related to inclusivity and empathy toward PWDs.

The forum entitled *"Bual Bicara: Cakna OKU"* panel discussion held during the *Festival Altruisme 3.0* on October 7, 2023, featured distinguished speakers, including Dr. Ahmad Idham Ahmad Nadzri from Eden Firdaus Special Education, Prof. Madya Dr. Noor Shafina Mohd Nor from UiTM, and Prof. Madya Dr. Ghazali Yusri Abd Rahman, who collectively addressed pressing issues related to inequality and accessibility for PWDs in Malaysia. The event was moderated by Prof. Madya Ts Dr. Roslinda Alias, the director of *Unit Perkhidmatan Orang Kurang Upaya* (Unit for Persons with Disabilities Services, UPO) and aimed to raise awareness about the challenges faced by PWDs while advocating for a more inclusive society.

Research Participants

The participants for this study consisted of **31 individuals** who attended a community forum on PWD awareness. This diverse group included community members, educators, policymakers, and family members of PWDs, ranging in age from 20 to 55 years. Their participation provided valuable insights into the general community's perceptions of PWDs and the effectiveness of the forum in shifting those perceptions.

Research Ethics and Sampling Techniques

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the research process. Prior to participation, all respondents were informed of the research objectives and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity. Additionally, the forum organizers obtained informed consent from all participants before administering the survey.

The study employed a **convenience sampling technique**, selecting participants who were readily available and attended the forum. This non-probability sampling method was chosen due to its practicality, given the specific group of attendees present at the forum. While convenience sampling has limitations, it provided a useful preliminary assessment of how forums impact community awareness of PWDs.

Quantitative Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data was collected using a structured **survey questionnaire** administered immediately following the forum session. The survey measured participants' levels of awareness, empathy, and perceptions toward PWDs before and after the forum. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to capture the degree of change in attitudes.

For data analysis, **descriptive statistics** were used to summarize the responses. This included calculating the mean, median, and frequency distribution of participants' answers. The findings were then compared to determine whether the forum had a measurable impact on awareness and attitudes toward PWDs. Additionally, the data was analyzed to identify persistent challenges such as societal stigma.

Data Presentation

Research Question 1: To what extent did the forum influence participants' awareness and perceptions of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)?

Table 2: Changes in Awareness and Perceptions of PWDs

Indicator	Pre-forum (Mean)	Post-forum (Mean)	Change
Awareness of PWD challenges	2.0	4.5	+2.5
Understanding of the capabilities of PWDs	2.2	4.6	+2.4
Perceptions of societal inclusion of PWDs	2.1	4.4	+2.3
Commitment to advocating for PWD right	2.5	4.7	+2.2
Comfort level in interacting with PWDs	2.8	4.2	+1.4

The results indicate a significant increase in awareness and understanding of PWDs among participants. For instance, awareness of PWD challenges improved from a mean score of 2.0 to 4.5, suggesting that the forum effectively heightened community knowledge about the issues faced by PWDs. Additionally, participants reported a greater commitment to advocating for PWD rights, with scores rising from 2.5 to 4.7. This data suggests that forums serve as effective platforms for fostering understanding and promoting advocacy for PWD inclusivity within the community.

Research Question 2: What impediments, despite awareness initiatives, continue to prevent their participation in society?

Table 3: Barriers to Participation

Barrier Category	Pre-Score (Mean)	Post-Forum Score (Mean)	Change
Accessibility Barriers	**3.5**	**2.9**	**-0.6**
Physical access (e.g., ramps, doorways)	3.7	3.0	-0.7
Transport accessibility	3.4	2.8	-0.6
Signage clarity (e.g., braille, large print)	3.2	2.5	-0.7
Societal Stigma	**3.8**	**3.1**	**-0.7**
Negative stereotypes about PWDs	3.6	3.0	-0.6
Perceived discomfort in social settings	3.9	3.2	-0.7
Lack of Resources	**3.4**	**3.1**	**-0.3**
Availability of support programs	3.5	3.0	-0.5
Awareness of resources among PWDs	3.3	3.1	-0.2

While the forum increased awareness, several hurdles to PWD participation remained. Accessibility obstacles improved somewhat, with the average score dropping from 3.5 to 2.9. However, some concerns, such as transportation accessibility and signpost clarity, continue to get reasonably good marks. Additionally, social stigma remains a substantial problem, with the mean score dropping from 3.8 to 3.1. This implies that, despite growing knowledge, cultural prejudices and institutional constraints continue to restrict the participation of PWDs in community. While the forum increased awareness, several hurdles to PWD participation remained. Accessibility obstacles improved somewhat, with the average score dropping from 3.5 to 2.9. However, some concerns, such as transportation accessibility and signpost clarity, continue to get reasonably good marks. Additionally, social stigma remains a substantial problem, with the mean score dropping from 3.8 to 3.1. This suggests that, despite improved knowledge, cultural prejudices and institutional barriers continue to prevent people with disabilities from participating in communal life.

Triangulation of Data: Open-Ended Survey Responses

In addition to the quantitative data collected through Likert scale questions, participants were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in the survey. This qualitative feedback provides further insights into how the forum influenced their awareness and perceptions of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), as well as the ongoing challenges that prevent PWD participation in society.

Research Question 1: To what extent did the forum influence participants' awareness and perceptions of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)?

Many respondents expressed a deepened understanding of PWD challenges after attending the forum. One participant wrote: *"The forum opened my eyes to the everyday struggles of PWDs, especially in terms of accessibility. I never realised how difficult it can be for them to navigate public spaces."*
Another attendee commented: *"Before the forum, I didn't know much about PWD rights or their capabilities. Now, I feel more confident advocating for inclusivity in my workplace and ensuring we provide equal opportunities."*
These open-ended responses align with the quantitative data that indicated a significant increase in awareness and empathy for PWDs, with the mean score for understanding PWD challenges rising from 2.0 to 4.5 after the forum.

Research Question 2: What impediments, despite awareness initiatives, continue to prevent PWD participation in society?

Despite increased awareness, several respondents highlighted barriers that continue to hinder the participation of PWDs. One participant noted: *"While I learned a lot from the forum, I feel that there are still major issues with accessibility in our town. Many buildings lack ramps, and public transportation is not PWD-friendly."*
Another respondent reflected on societal attitudes: *"The forum made me realise how much stigma still exists. Even though people are more aware now, PWDs are often treated differently or seen as incapable. Changing these deep-rooted perceptions will take time."*

Some participants also pointed out the lack of adequate resources for PWDs: *"There are programs available for PWDs, but many people don't know about them, or they're difficult to access. The forum was a good start, but we need more initiatives to make these resources known and easier to use."*

In summary, this investigation underscores the indispensable function of forums in the process of improving community comprehension and inclusivity for individuals with disabilities (PWDs). The quantitative data from the post-forum survey confirmed that structured dialogue and personal narrative can effectively alter perceptions of PWDs by demonstrating a substantial increase in awareness, empathy, and commitment to advocacy among participants. This shift in awareness aligns directly with the first research objective, highlighting the forum's role in challenging preconceived biases and fostering a supportive community atmosphere. The qualitative insights further enhanced these findings by demonstrating the profound impact of lived experiences shared during the forum. This content resonated profoundly with attendees and nurtured a genuine desire to support PWD initiatives. Such personal connections were essential in building empathy, indicating that forums serve as a bridge between knowledge and emotional understanding, which is critical in cultivating lasting support for inclusivity.

Nevertheless, the research also revealed persistent barriers that continue to impede the complete participation of PWDs in society, despite the positive outcomes. Challenges such as profoundly ingrained misconceptions, inadequate accessibility, and societal stigma continue to necessitate ongoing attention. This finding directly addresses the second research objective by highlighting that even as awareness improves, structural and attitudinal obstacles persist, suggesting a need for broader, systemic change. The necessity of ongoing advocacy work and awareness initiatives was underscored by the participants' express recognition of these obstacles. This shows an important point that, while forums can change perceptions, addressing deep-rooted issues like accessibility and stigma requires ongoing and varied efforts beyond just awareness events.

The significance of establishing inclusive spaces in which community members can engage in meaningful dialogue about PWD issues is emphasized by the results of this study. "Bual Bicara: Cakna OKU" is a forum that not only educates but also empowers individuals to act in order to promote a more inclusive society. Ultimately, the research promotes the implementation of enduring initiatives that challenge stigma, create practical solutions, and promote understanding to improve the quality of life for PWDs within the community. For sustained impact, it is essential to integrate these forums with other ongoing community efforts, such as policy adjustments and accessibility improvements, to ensure that they contribute to long-term, substantive change. It is imperative to continue to expand upon these endeavors to guarantee that the rights of PWDs are upheld in all facets of community life and that their voices are heard.

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